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No. 15, 1960/61

Outline Of Reference Paper On:

SOVIET LIVING STANDARD: PROPAGANDA AND REALITY

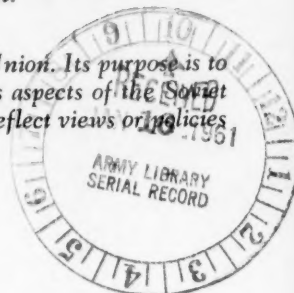
A public-opinion survey has given evidence of a rise in the Soviet living standard, Komsomolskaya Pravda told its readers in a feature article last fall. The poll was an example of how Soviet propaganda manipulates figures and contrives situations to create an image of prosperity from a background of relative poverty.

The living standard of any society can be measured by the ability of its citizens to obtain by legal means a reasonable amount of food and clothing, adequate housing and other essential services. This ability is mainly determined by the supply of goods and by the purchasing power of the citizens' income. The Soviet society fails the test on both scores.

Reports of shortages and service breakdowns fill the daily Soviet press and are matched only by the long lines of consumers outside the shops.

The wide scope of black marketeering in the USSR is another proof of the inadequate Soviet living standard. Furthermore, private enterprise, trade and reselling play an important role in the Soviet economy, bridging all manner of gaps in the system.

The second main factor, the purchasing power of the Soviet worker's wages, cannot insure an adequate living standard for him. In buying basic foods and clothing, the ruble does not stand up against the West German mark or the U.S. dollar.



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"How has your living standard changed in recent years?" This was one of four questions submitted by the Institute of Public Opinion to Soviet citizens leaving Moscow by rail. The Soviet youth organ Komsomolskaya Pravda subsequently published an analysis of the survey, based on 1399 completed forms. According to the report, 73 per cent of the questionnaires indicated a rise in the living standard. The conclusion of the authors was "that the measures undertaken by the Party in recent years in the field of public welfare have affected all strata and groups of the population without exception" (October 7, 1960).

The questionnaire had not established, however, a criterion against which the questionees could judge their present living standard; nor had the questionnaire specified a period of time. Further, the Komsomolskaya Pravda report did not explain how 1399 replies could be considered as representative of more than 212 million Soviet citizens not only from all 15 Union republics but also from all their component krais and oblasts, embracing all social strata, both sexes and a wide range of family situations and ages -- an inclusiveness that the survey claimed to have.

The authors of the report blatantly contradicted the entire Soviet press when they claimed that "...the most tangible results have been achieved by the consistent progress toward the creation of a genuine abundance of food products and consumer goods." Contrast this assertion with the following quotation from Pravda: "In the course of the Seven Year Plan, the Soviet people will be adequately provided with attractive clothing and footwear of good quality" (December 13, 1960), unequivocally indicating that while the Soviet population's requirements of clothing and footwear may be adequately met by 1965, there will be no question of an abundance even five years from now.

Unexpectedly, the "authors' slip is showing" at the end of their analysis, for they state: "The problem of satisfying the people's requirements of food and essential goods is no longer as acute as it was in the postwar years (Komsomolskaya Pravda, October 7, 1960).

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Another example of the authors' fuzzy thinking is their conclusion that the desire, expressed in several of the questionnaires, for an extension of the network of kindergartens and creches is due to the "general material security of the people," which in its turn is reflected in an "exceptionally high birthrate." Comments in the press suggest the real reason for this desire: the number of nurseries and creches is inadequate and there is an ever-increasing need for all members of the family to work in order to maintain a bearable living standard. Komsomolskaya Pravda itself published a letter from a young worker, who complained about the astronomical expense of the Soviet space program. "We are still up to our necks in terrestrial matters," he admonished. "There are not enough houses or creches, goods are expensive..."

The 1399 questionnaires are typical of the way in which propaganda is used in the Soviet Union to build an image of prosperity from relative poverty, as compared with Western standards. What, then, is the true test of an adequate living standard? It is the ability of the average citizen in a given society to obtain by legal means what is necessary for him to live, that is, food, clothing, accommodation and essential services. The two main factors in determining his ability to do so are the availability of the necessary quantity of goods to satisfy his and everybody's needs and the purchasing power of his income.

How about availability of products in the Soviet Union? This is what the selfsame Komsomolskaya Pravda wrote about the Poltava Region, formerly one of the richest agricultural areas of the Ukraine:

This paper has received several letters from the Poltava area. The correspondents complain that the shops are frequently without milk, meat and fish. Unfortunately this is true... it is still worse in other towns in the oblast -- Mirgorod, Lubny, Piryatina... There, as nowhere else, it is difficult to buy meat and milk (December 10, 1960).

Izvestia chimed in with two examples of service breakdown from the center of the Pavlodar oblast in western Siberia and Stalino in the Don Basin:

... There is no light. They bring the water late and sometimes there is nothing to wash with... In a new shop we were surrounded by women workers... They have no linen; the calico has not been delivered... There are no ready-made women's dresses. There is very little footwear (December 14, 1960).

True, the shop windows evidence a "genuine abundance" of products:

I happened to see a box of chocolates in the window of the food shop on Komsomolskaya street, so I went inside and asked to have them wrapped up. I got the answer: "They are only for display, they are not for sale." In the fish shop on the same street, I asked for canned fish fillets and received the same reply: "It is only for display." I wanted to buy some green chiffon in a drapery shop on the corner of Mir and Komsomolskaya streets, but was again told: "The chiffon is not on sale, it is only for display" (Literaturnaya Gazeta, Literary Gazette, July 30, 1960).

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Even products necessary for maintenance of health of the population are in short supply. Soviet Health Minister Kurashov had to admit:

"The public is justified in complaining about the scarcity of sulfanilamide, salicylic, anti-tuberculosis and hormone drugs, vitamins, medical instruments, even thermometers, gauze, cotton wool and rubber goods" (Meditzinsky Rabotnik, Medical Worker, December 7, 1960).

Shortages of consumer goods and food products and the constant snags in their distribution are absolutely universal. They make themselves felt even in the capitals of Union republics and all the more so on state farms in the Virgin Lands and on new construction sites. In a workers' settlement in Perm Oblast, "it has reached the point where there are even great queues for one's daily bread..." (Pravda, March 16, 1960).

The continual long lines outside shop are a curse to the public and serve as indisputable evidence of shortages. The directors of the Labor Research Institute bitterly exclaimed: "Dozens of leisure hours are consumed in this country by these long-tailed monsters -- queues. Who will help to wrest our hours from them?" (Komsomolskaya Pravda, July 29, 1960).

The existence of black marketeers in the USSR is further irrefutable proof of the inadequate living standards of the Soviet population. The state wages a persistent and patently unsuccessful war against a huge army of "speculators," "contractors" and private traders. It is perfectly obvious that a black market can exist only in a country which suffers from a permanent scarcity of consumer goods.

It should be pointed out in this connection that private enterprise, trade and reselling play a particularly important part in the Soviet economy at the present time, bridging all manner of gaps in the system. In order to avoid punishment for failure to fulfill their quota of "sales" to the state, directors of collective farms make up the deficit by buying cattle, butter, milk, eggs, fowl, etc., from the farmers' private plots at high prices and by then selling the products to the state at ridiculously low prices.

Soviet theoreticians and economists are forced to think up the most distorted arguments in an attempt to prove to the Soviet people that, despite appearances, they live better than the "oppressed" working class in the capitalist world. The Soviet economist Varga, asked why there was a chronic shortage of goods in the USSR whereas there was a glut in the capitalist world, gave the following farcical reply: "Because the income of the working masses in the capitalist countries is insufficient to absorb the volume of goods with which the capitalists constantly flood the market in pursuit of profit" (Kommunist, No. 18, 1958).

The second main factor, the purchasing power of a worker's income, does not insure a satisfactory standard for the Soviet citizen. As proof let us take the following comparison:

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According to Soviet statements on the wages of qualified workers, technical and administrative personnel, the average monthly remuneration is about 950 Rubles (Izvestia, July 24, 1960; Sovetskaya Rossiya, Soviet Russia, July 28, 1960; Sotsialistichesky Trud, Socialist Labor, Nos. 10 and 11, 1956; Pravda, No. 2, 1960; Voprosy Ekonomiki, Economical Problems, No. 5, 1960).

In the United States a low-paid charwoman receives \$170 a month (Pravda, November 25, 1960) and an unemployed worker an average benefit of \$116 (Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn, International Life, No. 5, 1960). In West Germany an unemployed worker receives insurance of about 185 Marks a month. The table below shows how much each of these sums would buy of certain basic foodstuffs and consumer goods in the respective countries.

		USSR	U.S.A.		West Germany
		950 Rubles	\$170	\$116	DM185
Milk	(liters)	328	654	446	430
White bread	(kilos)	301	395	270	132
Lard	"	48	347	236	362
Meat	"	58	94	64	31
Butter	"	40	113	77	31
Margarine	"	66	258	187	84
Sugar	"	119	680	464	132
Good Quality Material	(meters)	2.4	21	14.5	3.7
Mens Shoes	(pairs)	3	24.3	16.3	7
Womens Shoes	"	2.5	21	14.5	5
Mens Shirts		8	34	23.2	12
Wrist Watches		2	5.7	4	4

Soviet prices are taken from Pravda (October 12, 1960) and Byulleten Roznichnykh Tsen, Bulletin of Retail Prices, Moscow, 1959. Ruble values at rates obtaining before the currency reform of January 1961.

No detailed comment is necessary. It is quite clear that despite the claims of Soviet propaganda, the standard of living of a Soviet worker compares unfavorably with that of a low-paid worker in the U.S.A., and even with that of an unemployed person in either the U.S.A. or West Germany. Comparison with the latter category is particularly apt in view of the stress laid by Soviet propaganda on the sad state of the unemployed in the United States and West Germany. Two other points to note are, first, that American rates of unemployment benefit are quoted from a highly biased Soviet source and, second, that a Soviet citizen, unable to find any of the above goods in state shops, would have to pay even more inflated prices in a collective farm market or to speculators, which would still further widen the gulf.

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